

# For Parents: Children's Tantrums and Acting-Out Behavior



## What You Should Know

Engaging parents in power struggles is a normal part of every child's development. While toddlers are famous for their full-scale tantrums, the arguments and oppositional behaviors of school-age kids and teenagers are no less dramatic. Sometimes these behaviors are hard to deal with. When kids are struggling to push away, parents feel that their authority is being challenged. Many children push away when they feel insecure about their ability to take care of themselves. They may protest loudest when their need for parents' help and authority is greatest.

When children have experienced a disaster, often they feel that they have lost control of their world and of themselves. They are overwhelmed with fear and may go to great lengths to regain power and control. Opposing and struggling with parents, teachers, and friends can be the easiest way to fight feeling small and helpless; after a disaster, their tantrums and acting out often increase in frequency and intensity. However, when children succeed in drawing adults into battles, they will not only continue to feel small, but they will also risk losing the very support that they need. They may become more afraid as they get into fights that they can't win. Our job is to help kids put the brakes on these unproductive battles and find effective ways to deal with the frightened, helpless feelings that were born out of the disaster.

## What Can Help

- **Be aware of how you're feeling.** If you are upset, angry, or distressed, take time to calm yourself before you respond to your child. As long as you are annoyed or irritable, you won't be able to soothe or support him/her.
- **Remind children of the connection between their behavior and feelings.** Then talk about the feelings during the disaster and the new worries and feelings that have come up since the event.
- **Maintain the routines that your family had before the disaster.** Children feel safest when there is order and predictability.
- **Tell children that they are starting a fight that you don't want to have.** Say as calmly as you can, "What you are doing is making me mad. You may want to fight, but I don't, because it doesn't help you and it won't help you feel better."
- **If children continue to try to engage you in the fight, offer three choices.** Say, "You can either (1) do what I have asked, (2) talk about what is upsetting you, or (3) go to your room and calm yourself down, but you can't take this out on me." Once calm, he/she may be ready to work things out.
- **The fight has to stop first.** The middle of a fight or tantrum is not the time to try to have a discussion. Give your child the space he/she needs to self-soothe before trying to resolve things.
- **In a calm moment, introduce these ideas:**
  - **You've noticed changes in behavior.** Say, "Since the event, you have been getting into a lot of fights about things that usually aren't a big deal. Can you tell me how you've been feeling since it happened?"
  - **Fighting doesn't help.** Say, "Fighting with me isn't helping you feel better. It makes both of us mad, and, when you can't stop yourself and I have to punish you, it can't feel good."
  - **I'm in charge.** Say, "Even when you are struggling with your feelings about the event, my job is to help you to stop [the behavior]. If you want to talk about your feelings, I'm willing to listen, but whether you want to or not, your behavior is unacceptable."
  - **There will be consequences.** Say, "If you continue [the behavior], then we will find ways of reminding you of your responsibilities; you will have restrictions." Choose a consequence that is short term, that you can enforce without a struggle, and that your child cares about. Always try to give a warning, which gives your child a chance to control him/herself.

- **When children recognize the connection between the fighting and the feelings resulting from the disaster, they will fight less.** When the next struggle begins, interrupt it by announcing, “What we’ve been talking about is happening again . . .” If your child can talk with you, that may settle things down. If not, you may have to give a warning of a consequence. Then turn or walk away, to give your child a few minutes to try to get back in control.
- **Talk with a doctor or counselor.** If you believe that the tantrums or other acting out behavior are getting worse, more extensive treatment may be needed. Ask for a referral to a behavior specialist who has experience in treating children after disasters.